

Commentary

Farmland protection bill's green foes

OPPOSITION FROM ENVIRONMENTAL groups and the state Department of Ecology was the last thing Dave LeRoux expected when he set out to save farmland in Clallam County.

The recipient of two awards for environmental activism partnered with fellow environmentalist Walter Johnson — now a member of the Sequim School Board — to demonstrate a means of saving farmland.

In 2005, they bought 13 contiguous five-acre parcels — 65 acres of the historic Hunt Family Farm — at the southeast corner of Kitchen-Dick Road and Old Olympic Highway.

They named it Discovery Trail Farm, after the adjacent Olympic Discovery Trail on which LeRoux has been a leading volunteer worker and fundraiser for 20 years.

Martha Ireland



Theirs was the first project attempted under the cluster portion of regulations adopted to resolve a 1996 appeal of Clallam's agricultural zoning.

"And it will be the only project attempted," LeRoux says, "unless things change."

Like the vast majority of farmland in Clallam's East End, the Hunt Farm was platted into five-acre parcels prior to the 1990 enactment of the state Growth Management Act.

Each of those lots carries a secure development right for one house and a private 5,000-gallon well.

Clustering voluntarily combines parcels into fields large enough to be commercially viable for agriculture, by moving the home-sites onto a cluster of small lots with a shared well.

Environmentalists prefer downzoning, but with land already divided into pre-existing parcels, LeRoux says, "cluster development is the only option we have and currently our county ordinance is useless."

The barrier is a state Department of Ecology ruling that a cluster development may have

only one 5,000-gallon well, serving no more than 14 homes.

County code would allow 18 clustered homes plus a farmhouse at Discovery Trail Farm. LeRoux proposes 15 homes.

He hopes to also offer neighboring landowners the option of contracting with him for water if they do cluster developments instead of selling ranchettes.

Legislative fix sought

His 371-foot-deep well has ample capacity, LeRoux said, and it taps the third aquifer which doesn't draw from the Dungeness River.

Most individual wells stop in the first aquifer, "which sucks water almost directly out of the river," he says.

When Ecology's water rights permitting staff wouldn't budge, LeRoux sought a legislative fix.

Rep. Kevin Van De Wege, D-Sequim, one of our three state legislators, introduced House Bill 2532, which would create a Clallam-specific pilot program for cluster development water rights.

The two-page bill "is pro-environment [and would] get rid of

the roadblock," Van De Wege said.

However, Ecology, Futurewise and the Washington Environmental Council tagged HB 2532 for opposition.

Futurewise — the same activist organization that has Clallam's rural zoning and other Comprehensive Plan elements tied in knots — contends clusters are not the best way to save farmland.

"They may be right," said LeRoux, "but not in Clallam County, where we have just a few thousand acres and most of that is already short-platted into five-acre ranchettes."

A loyal Washington Conservation voter, LeRoux was "baffled, discouraged and disheartened" by testimony last week against "one of the greenest bills legislators will have a chance to vote on this year," he said.

Especially in light of support from local environmental community leaders who "see what's happening," LeRoux said, "Washington Conservation Voters is not doing their homework."

Supporting HB 2532, Rep. Lynn Kessler, D-Hoquiam, another of our three state legislators and the House majority

leader, said:

"Dave [LeRoux] is a better steward of the water than what [the opponents] are proposing, but ideology doesn't always fit common sense, and this proposal is total common sense."

However, a negative listing on the Washington Environmental Council's "Hot List" makes it difficult to win support from a majority of legislators, said Van De Wege.

He planned to meet with stakeholders last night to hopefully "build understanding and alleviate concerns," he said.

"They don't seem to be grasping, if we don't give people tools, we're not going to have any farmland left in Clallam County," Van De Wege said.

Martha Ireland was a Clallam County commissioner from 1996 through 1999 and is the secretary of the Republican Women of Clallam County. She and her husband, Dale, live on a Carlsborg-area farm.

Her column appears Fridays. E-mail her at irelands@olympen.com.